

Nest adds new member to Kenai Peninsula bird list

by Todd Eskelin

This past summer a bird species was found breeding on the Kenai Peninsula for the first time.

I was a little surprised to hear that it was the first nesting record, because I often see these birds and assumed that they bred somewhere on the Peninsula. Forest Service biologist Bill Schuster documented a northern hawk owl nesting in the Kenai Mountains near the Chugach National Forest-Kenai National Wildlife Refuge boundary. Hawk owls have occasionally nested near Anchorage, but we have never observed any nests down here until last summer.

It was an exciting event for birders, and Bill escorted several hundred people to the nest for a glimpse of the birds. To keep impacts to a minimum, Bill guided visitors to the nest in small groups. Many bird watchers came from out of state to see the birds.

I did a little research and found that northern hawk owls are one of the least studied birds in North America. Very little is known about numbers of birds, trends in the population, or what if any threats exist to the species. Northern hawk owls inhabit boreal forests from Alaska to Newfoundland on our side of the planet and from Scandinavia to Siberia on the other side.

So, why is there so little known about these birds? Unlike many owls, they are diurnal (feed during the daytime) and they like to perch in the tops of trees while hunting. They are called “hawk owls” because they are the only “long-tailed” owls in North America. They look and behave like a hawk, but have an owl head.

Experts consider them different enough to be classified as the only member of their genus. Not only are they easy to see, but also they seem to be fairly tolerant to humans and allow for close viewing during the winter months. So, one would think that with their unique stature and highly visible habits, they would be one of the most studied owls, not the least.

Bird banding often is used to determine how long birds live, where and how they migrate, and many other details about their lives. Last winter, I decided to start banding hawk owls, when I could find them in areas where they could be safely captured. This has proved to be more difficult than I expected; to date, I have managed to band only one hawk owl on the

Peninsula.

I expected to band more birds this winter, but so far I haven't found any. I found several birds last winter around Bridge Access Road and along Kalifornsky Beach Road but there was too much traffic, and it would have been unsafe to try to catch them. I did catch one bird on Funny River Road, and it stayed in the same area for several weeks. It disappeared in the spring, presumably to nest somewhere else.

Interestingly, last winter produced many more sightings of this owl in our area than I ever remembered in the past.

Recently, I learned that our area was not the only place that had an increase in hawk owl sightings last winter. Rob MacDonald at the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge in Dillingham told me they were frequently seeing hawk owls, whereas normally they see only one or two per winter.

Rob also told me an amazing story about a banded hawk owl that was hit by a car in Dillingham. In February of 2000, Hardy Pletz banded a hawk owl near Edmonton, Alberta. Little did he know that the bird would be hit by a car only eight months later in Dillingham. He probably never imagined that the bird he banded would establish the world record for the longest recorded movement of a hawk owl.

The bird had traveled a distance of 1,980 miles in eight months. The previous record in North America was bird banded in New York and found dead 160 miles away in Quebec, Canada.

Worldwide, the record was 1,116 miles for a European banding record. This is quite a distance for what is believed to be a non-migratory species.

When possible, it is always good to check if a bird is banded. You never know when a road kill or a bird that the cat drags home may provide valuable information about a species. I will continue my banding efforts on hawk owls and would appreciate any sightings of these birds that Clarion readers might offer. Hawk owls observations in the summer months would be especially useful, as they might lead us to new nest discoveries. Winter sightings are helpful because winter is the best time to catch the birds for banding.

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